MIDDLESEX NEWS, Framingham, MA - Sept. 26-Oct. 2, 1986 CR: B. Greenwood

9/10-86

INVESTIGATING UFO SIGHTINGS

A Sensational Science That Gets No Respect

By KAREN KREBSBACH

Never mind that the conventioneer tucked the rolled tabloid underneath his arm; he couldn't hide the screaming headline, "I Gave Birth to a UFO Alien!"

He glanced mischievously around the room, presumably wondering if his colleagues gathered for the third annual UFO Forum at the Beverly Golf and Tennis Club one weekend last month - would get the joke.

But no one seemed to notice.

They were all too busy watching UFO documentaries, exchanging personal research tidbits or thumbing through the huge collection of pamphlets, journals and books for sale, ranging from classics like famed researcher Budd Hopkins' "Missing Time" to the recently released "Final Report of the Psychological Testing of UFO Abductees."

No story seemed too far out of this world for this crowd, gathered for a two-day conference sponsored by the 3,000-member Mutual UFO Network.

Convention topics ranged from the lastest UFO sightings to the federal government's most recent public records disclosure about UFOs, but the audience's most spirited questions - and the most fascinating stories from those sharing the podium - centered on alleged alien abduction cases.

UFO experts agree that in 80 to 90 percent of all reported abduction cases the alleged victim has mistaken fantasy for reality. But the remaining cases, they argue, are worthy of consideration.

Joe Nyman of Medfield is one of a growing number of independent investigators struggling to uncover and study stories of alien encounters, most of which require hypnosis to unravel. He has interviewed dozens of people who claim to have been prodded by aliens' needles, zapped with limb-paralyzing lights and beamed aboard aircrafts crowded with all kinds of bizarre characters presumably from outerspace.

"I'm not out to convince anybody that UFOs exist. I'm interested in getting cases and trying to put them into a coherent pattern," says Nyman, a software engineer. "The only reason I believe they exist is what I glean from talking to people who claim personal encounters of one kind or another. The sincerity, variety and genuine puzzlement, and sometime traumatic experiences of people who claim abduction experiences of their own. (Aliens) certainly exist and they are interacting with humans in some quite unknown way."

Like Nyman, Jim Melesciuc, director of the Massachusetts MUFON, isn't out to turn skeptics into believers. "We want to preserve the data. We feel it's an important part of history and without the data, it would be lost forever."

Melesciuc says part of the credibility problem with UFOs - and most certainly with alleged abduction cases - is that these topics often are too hot for scientists to handle publicly. "Many involved are closet ufologists," he says. "They study it, but don't want anyone to know because they don't want the 'ridicule factor.'"

Because only a couple hundred case histories have been chronicled, Nyman says, it is too early to reach any conclusions. He believes it may take another five to 10 years to do so.

Based on scanty evidence collected so far from the stories of alleged victims, Nyman speculates that hundreds - perhaps as many as hundreds of thousands - of humans have been abducted by aliens and may not know it.

In the UFO community, alleged abductions by aliens are referred to as "close encounters of the fourth kind." Encounters of the first kind include the close observation of a UFO; to be classified as a "second kind" encounter, there must be physical evidence of a UFO, such as scorched vegetation; the "third kind" requires sighting of aliens in or outside a UFO.

The modern era of UFO studies in this country dawned in 1947 when a reporter in Washington wrote about seeing crescent-shaped aircraft, whose movement he described as "plates skipping across the water." With that description, the term "flying saucers" was coined.

However, it was the highly publicized alleged abduction of New Hampshire residents Betty and Barney Hill in 1961 that quickly became the standard scientific case by which all others are judged.



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Joe Nyman
UFO investigator

Twenty-five years ago last Friday the couple was driving back from Montreal when their car stalled out. They were allegedly yanked out of their car, brought through the woods to a glowing aircraft and taken inside for what they believe were rigorous medical examinations.

When recalling their stories separately under hypnosis, Betty and Barney Hill each became terrified.

The Hill case was a pivotal one because, for the first time, researchers received two independent accounts of what appeared to be the same abduction experience.

"Up until that point we had had inklings of this happening in out-of-the-way places," says Nyman. "But this story caught everybody's fancy. They became national personalities." The couple toured the country telling their compelling story, prompting scores of people throughout the world to come forward with suspicions about their own abductions. The Hills' alien encounter, splashed across the front page of many major newspapers, was eventually detailed in John Fuller's book, "The Interrupted Journey."

The case made a lot of sense to investigators who had been wrestling with the concept of "lost time." The Hills had returned home that night, having "forgotten" two hours of the trip and they were unable to explain why Betty's dress was stained and torn, why their watches had stopped and why their car had several shiny spots on it.

"We have many cases involving missing time," says Ray Fowler of Hamilton, MUFON's director of investigations. "But we didn't pay any attention to this for a number of years."

Fowler, who became interested in UFOs when he saw his first one as a teen in 1947, also credits Steven Spielberg's 1977 blockbuster film, "Close Encounters of the Third Kind," with prompting alleged abduction victims to come forward in search of answers to nagging questions about flashbacks, dreams and memories. The abductions in the movie were based on research Spielberg conducted at the Center for UFO Studies in Chicago.

"That movie may have possibly taken the stigma off of that particular kind of case," theorizes Fowler, who has written four books on UFO-related phenomena, including two which chronicled the alleged abduction of a family from South Ashburnham.

"In the past, people (who might have had abduction experiences) may have talked to their priests, their rabbi, their psychologists, rather than come to a UFO agency," he says. But now, more and more people are coming to the experts, he says.

Melesciuc says the study of alleged abductees is too new to estimate how many people may have had similar encounters, but he believes that the interviews with hundreds worldwide so far are "just the tip of the iceberg." Due to the trauma of such an encounter or because aliens tell people to "forget" they had the experience, most people do not consciously recall abduction experiences.

About 95 percent of all alleged abductees require hypnosis to recall their alien encounter, Fowler says. The other five percent can consciously recall many details, and often suffer from disturbing flashbacks.

Suspicion of an alien encounter is usually sparked by recurring nightmares with UFO themes, the unnatural fear of a familiar place, withdrawn behavior, or the noticing of scars that don't heal - usually on the back of the leg or knee or on the palm of the hand.

Often, the more they try to recall an incident, the more the memory eludes them, according to Fowler. For some people, the psychological stress can ruin a marriage or cause a job loss.

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Many alleged abductees have a "marker experience," which usually occurs between 1 and 3 a.m. when they wake and see an unusual figure in the bedroom, according to Nyman. The incident is generally written off as a nightmare, but those interviewed under hypnosis usually recount abduction experiences.

The classic case of the alien encounter involves someone who spots a UFO as he or she is driving or walking and arrives at their destination much later than expected.

Always wary of a hoax, UFO experts carefully check the stories of all alleged abductees. Many are subjected to lie detector tests, character reference checks and questions about their psychological history.

Common to the abduction experience is a variety of medical examinations, including needles in one's ears or navel; skin "scooped" from one's body - most often behind the knee - and the taking of samples of body fluids, such as sperm, Melesciuc says. Another common thread is that the experience, usually occurring first in childhood, is repeated every few years.

"People want answers and no one can help them," says Fowler. "It will plague them... It is so completely outside the realm of everyday experience."

Nyman rejects the theory that sci-fi films are the source of vivid memories dredged up by would-be abductees. These kinds of films have been known to put abductees to sleep, which Nyman theorizes is because they do not want to remember their experience.

He also dismisses skeptics' claims that since so many kinds of beings have been described in recounting alleged abductions, the stories are simply the product of overactive imaginations. Descriptions of alleged aliens cover a wide range of beings, although several "types" have been spotted worldwide, according to Fowler.

Most of the abductees Fowler has interviewed report seeing a three- to four foot-tall being, with a gray, clay-like complexion, large pear-shaped head, short neck and abnormally large wrap-around eyes. The being has small slits where a human would have a nose, ears or mouth, he said. Telepathy is often the method of communication and rarely do people report that the aliens walk. They are more apt to say that the aliens appeared to be floating.

Another commonly described type, according to Melesciuc, is a being wearing a tight-fitting suit who is less than five feet tall. He has a huge head and black, egg-shaped eyes, with only slits for his nose and mouth. Another type is a dark olive-skinned being resembling a Pharoah.

Despite what some investigators contend is mounting evidence that aliens do exist and are abducting humans, the field still gets no respect from the general public or the scientific community at large.

Yet Nyman and his fellow researchers, who receive little recognition and even less funding, continue searching for the final frontier which they believe lies locked within the memories of their fellow human beings.